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ABSTRACT

To discover the ways that superintendents describe their perceptions and beliefs regarding their roles as instructional leaders, researchers interviewed 81 California superintendents selected on the basis of continuing upward trends in student achievement in their districts over a 3-year period. The participants were divided into nine groups that addressed three major topics: (1) program quality; (2) principal recruitment and selection; and (3) assessment and accountability. In the area of program quality, superintendents see their duties as including the facilitation of curriculum/instructional plan development. In the second topic area, superintendents believe that one of their most crucial responsibilities is in establishing a strong support system for instructional leadership at school sites. For effective assessment and accountability, superintendents emphasize the need for a district management information system that provides quick access to student and school performance data. A practical framework for the superintendent's leadership role in school reform includes using symbolic leadership to create values, priorities, and beliefs. (40 references) (EJS)

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Constructing a Practical Framework for the Superintendent's Leadership Role in School Reform

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Constructing a Practical Framework for the Superintendent's Leadership Role in School Reform

School site reform has been the almost exclusive focus of educational improvement efforts for the past ten to twelve years. Stimulated by the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, subsequent studies and reports (for example, Carnegie Task Force, 1986; California's Commission on the Teaching Profession, 1985; Holmes Group Report, 1986; the Governors' Commission, 1986; *Leaders for America's Schools*, UCEA, 1987; Griffiths, Stout, and Forsyth, 1988; National Policy Board for Education Administration, 1988) have been preoccupied with the school as the center of change and reform. Like many statewide school improvement programs, the California School Leadership Academy (CSLA) was motivated by this reform literature to place great emphasis on strengthening the instructional leadership skills of school principals. CSLA, which was founded in 1985, views stronger instructional leadership at the school site as a crucial feature of school reform. It has developed a cohesive three-year curriculum focusing on leadership efforts which facilitate the transformation of a school's instructional program.

Internal (Barfield, 1989; Cox 1991) and external (Marsh, 1990) evaluations, along with refinements of CSLA's program, have led its developers to acknowledge that school site reform occurs most readily in a district in which there is organizational and contextual support for such reform (see also Hoyle, 1989; Peterson and Finn, 1988; Fullan, 1982; Wimpelberg, 1988). This acknowledgment has heightened CSLA's interest in the critical nature of the leadership role of the superintendent in bringing about significant school improvement. Furthermore, it has stimulated the creation of the Executive Leadership Center (ELC) for California Superintendents. The ELC has emerged out of a partnership with the California State Department of Education (CDE), the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA), and the California School Leadership Academy, with CSLA taking the primary responsibility for program development.

Perspective

Background

CSLA has not been alone in its heightened interest in studying the impact that the superintendent's leadership can have on the process of improving schools. In the last few years, there has been a small but growing interest on the part of researchers in the role of the superintendent in bringing about school reform (for example, Crowson, 1990 and 1987; Wimpelberg, 1988 and 1987; Peterson, Murphy and Hallinger, 1987; DeYoung, 1986; Cuban, 1985; Murphy, and Hallinger, 1982). Still, as Crowson (1990) reports, there is currently very little literature and a limited knowledge base to draw upon in studying the practices of the superintendency.

Superintendents have long engaged in their own practical and informal "research studies" with their colleagues. By comparing notes and sharing stories among themselves, they have discovered ways to guide their actions and improve practice. This practical "craft knowledge" remains largely an oral tradition and appears to be relatively untapped by more formal methodology. Because it is an oral tradition, the knowledge base lacks a conceptual framework that facilitates sense-making. As a result, it is relatively difficult to gain access to or generalize the "findings."

Purpose

The intent of this paper is to discuss the efforts of CSLA to bring focus to the superintendent's leadership role in school reform. CSLA's goal was to develop an authentic, relevant, and appropriate curriculum for the ELC. To accomplish this, it was the intent of CSLA's curriculum development team to construct a practical framework for tracing and understanding the instructional leadership role of the superintendent. The goal of the program developers was to draw upon the craft knowledge of effective superintendents related by them, along with literature related to organizational and educational reform (for example, Sergiovanni, 1991 and 1987; Schein, 1985; Bolman and Deal, 1984; Hickman and Silva,1984; Baldridge and Deal, 1983; Kanter, 1983; Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Cohen and March, 1974; Drucker, 1973 and 1968).

Procedures

Research Question

A central question guiding CSLA's initial efforts to develop the ELC was: **In what ways do superintendents describe their perceptions and beliefs regarding their roles as instructional leaders within their districts?** The ELC curriculum development team determined that the answers to this question would assist the developers in designing an appropriate leadership program which was responsive to the perceived needs of superintendents.

Participants

In order to avoid mismatching services with the target group, the developers conducted a highly structured series of focus group sessions with small subgroups of nine participants from a total group of 81 district superintendents. The 81 superintendents participating in the focus group sessions were selected on the basis of continuing upward trends in student achievement over a period of three years, as demonstrated by California Assessment Program (CAP) results (1987 - 1989). In addition, each participant was an acknowledged instructional leader who had demonstrated effective district leadership skills, as determined by peers through the ACSA Superintendency Committee and the California Department of Education. The selection process was premised on the assumption that it would result in participants who were representative of successful superintendents and whose opinions would have credibility with their peers.

Data Collection

The data collection design was constructed to involve the 81 participants in nine focus groups. Each focus group addressed three major topics:

- program quality
- recruitment and selection of principals
- assessment and accountability

Three focus sessions were developed to address each topic area. All nine groups dealt with the same focus areas and questions in order to identify trends, patterns, and overarching themes. The questioning sequence for each group was standardized as follows:

Topic Area: Program Quality

Focus Session One: Facilitating Strategic Curriculum Planning

Questioning Sequence:

What strategies do you use to facilitate the review of progress results in order to establish your district's instructional priorities and goals?

How do you determine an annual workscope for improving various curriculum areas?

How have you communicated curriculum priorities and solicited opinions from a broad spectrum of the school community in curriculum planning in your schools?

What approaches have you used to build school board consensus regarding priorities for curriculum renewal?

Focus Session Two: Developing Curriculum Based on Strategic Planning

Questioning Sequence:

What processes do you use for reviewing curriculum development in specific subject areas and making decisions regarding curriculum?

In what ways do you determine and sequence student outcomes necessary to reach learning goals and create documents that communicate these expectations?

What strategies have you used in planning curricular support for teachers and allocating necessary resources?

Focus Session Three: Implementing Strategic Curriculum Plans

Questioning Sequence:

In what ways have you provided intensive, ongoing staff development for school staffs to enable them to develop and deliver new curriculum?

How have you facilitated opportunities for school staffs to become involved in planning, sharing, and problem solving of curricular issues?

What systems are in place in your district to monitor implementation that continuously reinforces progress toward student learning goals?

How is student work monitored to check progress on student outcomes?

Topic Area: Recruitment and Selection of Principals

Focus Session Four: Recruiting and Selecting Principals

Questioning Sequence:

What characteristics do you look for in recruiting and selecting instructional leaders as principals of your district's schools?

In what ways do you prepare individuals to fulfill your expectations for instructional leadership?

How do you accomplish organizational goals through the recruiting/selecting process?

What strategies do you use to attract women and minorities to fill instructional leadership roles?

Focus Session Five: Providing Support That Promotes the Instructional Leadership of Principals

Questioning Sequence:

In what ways do you structure district services to support instructional leadership in schools?

What feedback do you give to principals to support their growth in instructional leadership?

What strategies do you use to promote the school board's support of the instructional leadership actions that principals take?

How have you created expectations for instructional leadership among the members of your district's parent community?

Focus Session Six: Holding Principals Accountable

Questioning Sequence:

What criteria do you look for in assessing instructional leadership in your dostrict's principals?

How have you created a system for collecting and monitoring data related to instructional leadership?

What strategies do you employ to ensure that principals receive authentic appraisals of their performance relative to established criteria for instructional leadership?

In what ways do you work with the school board in establishing reasonable timelines for expecting change or improvements in specific schools or for evaluating the effectiveness of principals?

Topic Area: Assessment and Accountability

Focus Session Seven: Ensuring the Use of Comprehensive Assessment Procedures

Questioning Sequence:

In what ways do you focus attention on the importance of checking on student outcomes and giving priority attention to the use of student performance measures in curriculum planning?

What process do you use in your district to establish criteria for determining which student outcomes should be formally assessed?

How do you ensure that your district's curriculum planning process aggregates key results from authentic student performance measures?

What opportunities and resources do you provide to enable staff to understand, value, and use authentic measures to assess student learning experiences?

Focus Session Eight: Developing a Comprehensive Accountability System

Questioning Sequence:

How have you established a system in your district to measure student progress, as defined by key indicators?

In what ways have you linked performance expectations for staff to student performance improvement targets?

What approaches have you used to establish a management information system to determine progress toward improvement targets?

What system have you established for keeping board, staff, parents, and community informed of the district's accomplishments and improvement efforts?

Focus Session Nine: Using a Comprehensive Accountability System

Questioning Sequence:

How do you communicate the purposes of your district's accountability system and focus staff efforts on using it to improve school and district effectiveness?

What system has been established in your district to engage school staffs in reviewing and analyzing performance data to identify program improvement needs?

In what ways have you used performance data in your district's ongoing program improvement efforts?

What strategies have you implemented to provide rewards and sanctions related to student performance progress?

Group Interviewing Processes

Group facilitators were selected on the basis of their familiarity with group processes and their understanding of group dynamics. They were trained to facilitate discussions and to create permissive, open environments, nurturing different points of view, perceptions, and ideas without pressuring the groups to achieve consensus or vote for preferences. Interviewing facilitators also were trained in strategies that enabled them

- to communicate questions clearly
- to keep discussions on track

- to subtly guide conversations back on target when irrelevant topics were introduced
- to make transitions from question to question
- to maintain group enthusiasm and interest for the topic
- to assess the mood of the group and pace the interviewing process appropriately
- to listen and rephrase statements when necessary

The group interviews were carefully structured to be relaxed, comfortable, and enjoyable interchanges in which group members could influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion. The nondirective interviewing procedures used by group facilitators were structured around open-ended questions, which allowed participants to respond freely without establishing boundaries or providing guidelines for potential response categories. (See the questioning sequences in the preceding section.) The nondirective interviewing, nurtured by skillful probing by facilitators, allowed participants to share the experiences and attitudes which they deemed to be the most important and relevant.

In addition to group facilitators, each focus group also worked with a group recorder, whose responsibility it was to take comprehensive notes, operate recording equipment, deal with logistical requirements, and headoff interruptions.

Data Analysis

The open-ended nature of the focus group interviewing allowed participants to select the ways in which they responded and, furthermore, encouraged active interchanges among participants that often prompted them to change their opinions after discussion with others. Specifically, in this study, these open-ended processes resulted in an unanticipated volume of raw data that required both content analysis and interpretation.

The central question guiding the data analysis was, **In what ways do superintendents describe their perceptions and beliefs regarding their role as instructional leader?**

The major objective of the data analysis was to identify commonalities, trends, patterns, and overarching themes regarding the ways in which superintendents talked about instructional leadership in three major areas of their work:

- program quality
- recruitment and selection of principals
- assessment and accountability.

Analysis of the data proceeded from a content analysis of the raw data through the development of descriptive summaries and interpretive statements. The raw data from audio tapes were transcribed and organized into categories . These data were then compared with the comprehensive notes taken by the group recorders and major themes were identified. Once the major themes were identified, descriptive summaries were constructed from participant statements. The descriptive summaries were then used to develop the interpretive statements which are reported below.

Findings

The analysis and interpretation of the data resulted in the creation of a knowledge base from which to proceed with curriculum development for the ELC. The findings highlight the specific ways in which superintendents understand their leadership roles in relation to transforming schools and also yield important beliefs held by superintendents regarding the obstacles that they perceive as preventing them from fully assuming such roles. In addition, the data provide clarity regarding the impact that superintendents perceive that they have on the instructional programs in their districts' schools.

The following interpretive statements regarding each topic area and focus session provide an overview of the findings. For each focus session, the findings are organized into categorical themes.

Topic Area: Program Quality

Focus Session One: Facilitating Strategic Curriculum Planning

Strategic Curriculum Plan: Superintendents facilitate the development of a curriculum/instructional strategic plan. The plan is developed through a strategic planning team and includes objectives, criteria for progress, and assessment procedures. The plan is long range (usually five years) and follows a planning cycle. The plan includes textbook alignment and articulation of curriculum. The community and staff have a role in the planning process.

Operational Plan: Superintendents work with others in the district to develop an annual operational plan to achieve the strategic goals. School Improvement Program (SIP) and other categorical funds and plans are folded together or integrated with the operational plan. All special funds are considered a part of the resource to accomplish the goals and are to be used to accomplish the strategic goals in the operational plan.

Mission Statements: Superintendents collaborate with others in the district to develop a district mission statement that captures the essence of the strategic curriculum plan. All departments, divisions, and schools develop mission statements that relate to the district mission statement.

Curriculum Council: Superintendents convene a curriculum council; through this forum, the staff and community can comment on and help shape plans. The council is responsible for supporting the articulation of all district programs, and for communicating district curriculum goals and directions.

Assessment: Superintendents support the development of an assessment/accountability program related to the district's goals. The system

utilizes test/achievement data to plan curriculum. Evaluation is tied to outcome goals. Site teams review and evaluate the usefulness of the process.

Allocation of Resources: Superintendents use the district's strategic plan in the budget planning process. They also recognize the importance of preparing a "state of the district report," which relates the budget and allocation of resources back to the strategic plan.

Leadership: Superintendents believe that they are responsible for taking the lead in setting priorities and bringing a focus to instruction in the district. They express this as "creating and articulating a vision for the district." They also create symbolic importance for the vision by meeting with principals and discussing site goals in relation to the district's priorities and vision. Superintendents review site goals with principals and ensure that there is a focus on student learning. Superintendents also make regular reports to the Board on progress in relation to strategic goals and priorities.

Focus Session Two: Developing a Curriculum Based on Strategic Planning

Resources: Superintendents believe that curriculum development requires staff, financial, and time resources, along with access to expertise, to have a true impact on student learning. They also believe that they are responsible for ensuring that all resources are allocated either directly, or in a supporting capacity, to the achievement of the strategic goals of the district.

Roles: Superintendents support site-based curriculum development and recognize the need to release teachers for participation in such endeavors. Superintendents expect principals to provide support for teacher participation and also to provide symbolic leadership through their own participation. They also acknowledge the importance of teacher leadership in these efforts. Superintendents believe that their own role should be one of working with the school board to set priorities and create expectations for school site staffs based on those priorities.

Curriculum Committee: Superintendents support the development of a district curriculum committee; through this forum, the staff and community can help plan the district's priorities, goals, and philosophy. The committee provides validation and buy-in.

Monitoring: Superintendents recognize the need to develop more effective means of assessing student performance and using that to make curricular improvements. Superintendents also believe that it is important to establish standards and criteria for student performance.

Focus Session Three: Implementing Strategic Curriculum Plans

Staff Development: Superintendents acknowledge that it is crucial to have a staff development program to support curriculum implementation. They believe it is important to involve teachers in teams to both develop and implement curriculum, but also recognize the need to provide training first.

Central Support: Superintendents recommend that the central office provide direct support to schools for curriculum development and implementation. They believe that their districts must establish standards that guide school site curriculum work. They also recognize the symbolic importance of providing incentive grants to teacher teams at specific schools.

Leadership: Superintendents believe that they should increase their visibility in schools and classrooms in order to create symbolic importance for the instructional process. They also believe it is symbolically important for them to provide principals with research and articles related to curriculum implementation.

Topic Area: Recruitment and Selection of Principals

Focus Session Four: Recruiting and Selecting Principals

Principal Characteristics: Superintendents consider the following characteristics when selecting principals:

- vision
- intelligence, knowledge, skill base
- knowledge of instruction
- supervision and coaching skills
- team attitude
- communication skills
- commitment, passion for the job
- student orientation
- assertive, action orientation
- professionalism
- mental health
- humor
- risk-taking orientation
- knowledge in the use of technology

Accomplishing the Goals of the District Through Hiring: Superintendents believe that the goals of the district are accomplished through hiring of principals in the following fashion:

- constructing an interview process that is centered around the
- recruiting people who share the vision and beliefs
- using the "assessment center" approach
- involving experienced principals in the process
- using a multifaceted process that places the candidate in a variety of situations

Recruiting from Underrepresented Groups: Superintendents believe that most of the minority principals should be recruited from within the district and that the following actions should be taken within the district:

- conducting an aggressive teacher leadership development and recruitment program

- providing scholarships and support for minority teachers to pursue administrative credentials
- encouraging minority students to pursue careers in education by organizing future teacher clubs on high school campuses

Preparing Principals: Superintendents support the participation of principals and teachers aspiring to be principals in a leadership training program. They also recommend the following:

- assigning potential leaders to curriculum task forces
- providing frequent opportunities for leadership experiences
- providing personal counsel, mentoring, and modeling leadership
- conducting formal evaluations
- clustering principals for peer discussions and collegial support networks, problem solving, action research, and sharing
- involving potential teacher leaders in the development of school improvement plans
- encouraging continued growth and study

Focus Session Five: Providing Support that Promotes the Instructional Leadership of Principals

Structure of Services to Support Principals: Superintendents believe that one of their most crucial responsibilities is to take the lead in setting direction, interpreting district policy, and establishing a strong support system for instructional leadership at the school site.They also recognize the importance of doing the following:

- developing and supporting a mentoring program
- organizing central support around curriculum and instructional development and implementation at the school site
- develop a district management information system which provides useful information for school site planning

Providing Feedback to Principals: Superintendents acknowledge that school visitations are an important opportunity to comment on principals' performances and to collect information about the progress of schools. They believe that they should meet regularly with principals to review teacher evaluations, teacher action plans, and assist where appropriate. They also recognize the importance of developing and monitoring a multiyear curriculum planning and development cycle that supports the development and implementation of curriculum at school sites. Comments on principals' performances can also can be provided through:

- multiyear contracts
- recognition at board meetings
- provision of safe forums for discussion of problems
- quarterly meetings with principals

- self-assessment instruments
- evaluation certification

Developing School Board Support for Principals: Superintendents acknowledge their responsibility to keep the school board informed of school programs. They also believe that they are responsible for working with board members to establish criteria for determining successful schools and for encouraging them to visit the schools regularly.

Focus Session Six: Holding Principals Accountable

Monitoring the Performance of Principals: Superintendents visit schools on a quarterly basis and devote time to reviewing achievement data and keeping a focus on student achievement. Superintendents believe that their visits to schools should be augmented by visits by other cabinet members. Monitoring the performance of principals should include:

- peer-review panels
- site action planning
- reviewing teacher evaluations with principals
- school progress reports
- self-assessment profiles
- personal growth plans
- reviewing multiple sources of school performance data

Criteria for Assessment: Superintendents believe that the following criteria should be used to evaluate principals:

- time spent in classrooms
- capacity to articulate clear goals and expectations
- quality of teacher evaluations
- instructional knowledge
- development of a site plan
- community involvement

Topic Area: Assessment and Accountability

Focus Session Seven: Ensuring the Use of Comprehensive Assessment Procedures

Student Performance Assessment: Superintendents believe that assessment procedures must be an integral part of the curriculum, and that student performance assessment must be developed by teachers as a part of their curriculum development endeavors.

Leadership: Superintendents recognize the symbolic importance of visiting schools, viewing student performance activities, and asking questions regarding student assessment procedures.

Checking Student Outcomes: Superintendents acknowledge the importance of monitoring student achievement on a regular basis and emphasize the crucial nature of having a district information management system that reports a variety of achievement and performance information.

Focus Session Eight: Developing a Comprehensive Accountability System

Management Information System: Superintendents emphasize the need for a district management information system that provides quick access to student and school performance data. They believe that the information should be readily accessible to principals and teachers for planning programs and for establishing performance standards.

Setting Performance Standards: Superintendents recognize the importance of working with the school board to establish performance goals for the district. They emphasize that the board's performance goals must be elaborated on by the district's curriculum council or task force and then used as a guide by individual school staffs in setting performance standards at the school sites. They also emphasize the importance of central support in helping schools to establish standards for student performance and to develop a school action plan to achieve student success.

Measuring School and Student Performance: Superintendents believe that performance measures must include indicators that go beyond standardized test data. They recognize the importance of authentic measures of student performance and real-world application and acknowledge that teachers must be involved in developing such measures, based on performance standards. They also suggest that school profiles should be developed and accountability report cards should be used.

Focus Session Nine: Using a Comprehensive Accountability System

Interpreting Data: Superintendents emphasize the importance of providing training to staff and the school board in interpreting data for effective program planning and intervention. They also recognize the importance of making the data accessible to school staffs so that they can create appropriate interventions at the school site.

School Action Plans: Superintendents believe that school staffs must be responsible for developing their own school action plans, based on district priorities and performance goals. They emphasize that once a school site staff has agreed to specific actions and standards of performance, they must then be expected to demonstrate accountability for their plans.

Rewards, Incentives, Sanctions: Superintendents recognize the importance of providing incentives for high performance, both by schools and by individuals. They acknowledge the symbolic importance of recognition and visibility of successful performance.

Conclusions

The responses of the superintendents in this study provide some important insights into the specific ways in which they perceive their roles as leaders of school reform. In reviewing the findings, the ELC curriculum developers identified four themes that permeated the responses. First of all, across all topic areas and focus sessions, the participants described the symbolic importance of their roles in creating values, priorities, and beliefs. Secondly, a pervasive theme was the importance of focusing on successful student learning and being able to articulate that in long-range, strategic, and visionary ways that were both compelling and empowering for others. A third theme that cut across all responses was the significance of creating a professional and collegial culture in which the staff was prepared to collaborate and take responsibility for establishing performance criteria, setting program goals, developing action plans, monitoring its own progress, and assuming accountability for its achievement in relation to the standards it had established. And finally, a fourth theme that emerged as important, in all areas and within all sessions, was the importance of developing an open, information-based organization in which staff could act responsibly and knowingly because of access to relevant information, staff and community opinions, and data.

The framework which follows, provides a system for organizing and understanding information about the ways in which effective superintendents make sense of their work.

A Practical Framework for the Superintendent's Leadership Role in School Reform

- Using symbolic leadership to create values, priorities, and beliefs
- Creating and articulating a vision of successful student learning that compels and empowers others to work to ahieve it
- Developing a professional and collegial culture of shared leadership, responsibility, and accountability
- Constructing an open, information-based organization in which responsible actions result from access to relevant information, staff and community opinions, and data

This framework spins out of the descriptions and perceptions that were woven into the responses of the eighty one superintendents who participated in this study. The framework will enable ELC curriculum developers to design an appropriate leadership development program which is both reflective of and responsive to the ways in which superintendents develop an understanding of their leadership roles. (See the Appendix for a listing of possible ELC seminar topics and a seminar schedule.) The four cross-cutting themes that have emerged in the superintendents' responses will provide the overarching structure and will also be the key performance goals that will guide curriculum development.

Further Research

As noted earlier, there exists relatively little inquiry into the leadership roles of superintendents or the ways in which they make sense of their work. Additional inquiry is needed to trace the cognitive maps of individual superintendents regarding the ways in which they learn about their work, synthesize that learning into intentional actions, reflect on the impact of those actions, and translate those reflections into theories of action. (Schon, 1987)

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